

## Transcript – Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco – Ep. 5, S.2

00:00:02:24 - 00:00:24:09

Louis

Welcome to season two of Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco from the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath, hosted by me, Louis Laurence. We are an international research group that investigates the tactics used by Big Tobacco to maximise its profits at the expense of public health. The evidence we produce helps society to hold this deadly industry to account.

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Louis

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Louis

For decades, the tobacco industry has been synonymous with harm, cancer, addiction, and aggressive marketing tactics that disproportionately target vulnerable communities. But in recent years, tobacco companies are now telling a new story, one where they're not the villain, but rather a public health partner investing in e-cigarettes and heated tobacco, co-opting terms like harm reduction and drawing attention to their sustainability goals rather than the exploitation in their supply chains.

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Louis

But is this a genuine shift, or is it just strategic storytelling? In today's episode, we're joined by Dr Iona Fitzpatrick from the University of Bath to discuss the tobacco industry and its use of language as a tool to rehabilitate its image. Welcome, Iona.

00:01:11:13 - 00:01:13:15

Iona

Thank you. Hi. It's nice to be here.

00:01:13:16 - 00:01:21:10

Louis

Good to have you Iona. So I guess let's start with this phrase transformation narrative. What do we actually mean by that?

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Iona

So, in tobacco control, when we talk about the transformation narrative, we're really talking about how the tobacco industry tells stories about itself and how those stories are communicated to their various audiences. So that might be consumers, it might be the public, it might be policymakers or investors. The transformation part of that term is about portraying big tobacco, the transnational corporations, as different to how they've been in the past.

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Iona

Not all the transnational companies actually use the term transformation. Each company prefers their own phrasing, but it's essentially about casting themselves as a different beast to the one that existed in the past.

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Louis

So you talk about the past there. What was their narrative from the past? How did these tobacco companies describe themselves, say, 10 or 20 years ago?

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Iona

Well, there have been a couple of landmark moments for Big Tobacco and public health. The Master Settlement Agreement in 1998 was a watershed moment for the tobacco industry having to change tack because the public were more aware than ever and policymakers were more aware than ever that Big Tobacco was undermining public health and having huge impacts on the healthy life

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Iona

years of population.

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Louis

So the Master Settlement Agreement that was this landmark legal case in the US, right, where tobacco companies and their executives were first forced to admit that they knew about the addictive properties of tobacco.

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Iona

Absolutely, that's what I'm talking about. So more recently, we've also had the Framework Convention for Tobacco Control, where the industry is faced with increasingly restrictive public health policy that in some cases excludes them from arenas that they had free access to in the past. And so they've had to be slightly more creative about the ways they access policymaking circles.

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Iona

And we see that through the way that they tell stories now, this transformation narrative that's the focus of the show today, is all about accessing the arenas they had free access to 30 years ago. They have to find new ways to get into those arenas now.

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Louis

What sort of arenas?

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Iona

I mean, the hearts and minds of consumers is one of those. The others would be policy setting arenas. So being at the table when a bill is discussed, a proposed tobacco control bill is discussed, or being a Conference of the Parties, for instance.

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Louis

So this transformation narrative then really it's a sort of a form of evolution in response to the changing society, changing pressures on those companies. Is that fair to say?

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Iona

I think that would be fair to say. I think all commercial organisations have a vested interest in supporting a sustainable future but whether their interest in that future is genuinely public minded is a different matter and certainly with the tobacco transnationals we see evidence that their intent is not publicly minded.

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Louis

So you've described the kind of the way they've adapted to these circumstances and developed this new narrative. In a sentence, what is the narrative that these companies is telling, what is this current story?

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Iona

So the transnationals each take a slightly different approach. They don't all use the word transformation, but broadly they use positive words that are usually quite ambiguous to describe a process or a way of being that makes them a good partner in public health. It makes them essential to fixing the problems caused by tobacco.

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Louis

So you've described a bit how they are becoming a friendlier face for consumer groups, governments, society in general. How does this narrative change actually play out? Sort of in practicalities like where do we see these stories being told across different public facing materials?

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Iona

So we see in their public facing materials so their websites, their YouTube channels, their engagements with public events like Cannes Lion. We see in those events that they're very keen to cast themselves as change makers or disruptors, people who are willing to challenge a status quo. And in their investor facing materials, so more inward facing materials...

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Louis

So these are the kind of reports that they give out to investors, people who are a part of the company?

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Iona

Yeah. So we would be looking at sort of annual reports or sustainability reports, as well as their Investor Day slides and things like that. We see in those materials that completely opposite to what they say in their YouTube videos, for instance, they discuss the stability of the cigarette market and the value of the combustibles portfolio that they hold.

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Iona

And it's just, it's apples and oranges, the stories that they tell. So they're saying on the one hand, look how strong the combustibles market is. And you can rely on us as an investment opportunity. And then on the flip side, they're telling the public that they're disrupting the market. They're a partner in transforming public health and improving the lives of millions of people.

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Iona

It always seems a little bit crazy to me that they that they can hold these two universes in their heads.

00:07:11:11 - 00:07:14:16

Louis

You mentioned this phrase Cannes Lion. What does that mean, exactly?

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Iona

Well, the Cannes Lion was a public forum held as part of the Cannes Lion creative festival that was open to the public, where they invited well-known media personalities from around the world, they were mostly American, to be interviewed by Philip Morris executives, to talk about Philip Morris as an organisation and the value of their commitment to transformation.

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Iona

So the whole remit of the event was very nonspecific. You know, it was about this transformation, which in itself is basically meaningless, but it sounds really good. And they used that forum to talk about, as I mentioned, their commitment to disrupting the status quo. So it makes them seem quite radical, slightly rebellious spirit, which is quite appealing from a public facing perspective.

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Iona

But what they are really talking about is tobacco control. So their status quo that they're trying to disrupt is the restriction of their involvement in public health policymaking.

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Louis

So it's the regulations really that to them are holding back their profit and restricting them, that's the status quo to them that they that they want to disrupt.

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Iona

Yeah but if you frame it in a very vague way and you say we're disrupting the status quo, that gives you really no sense of actually what they're trying to interfere with but it does sound appealing.

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Louis

Yeah, it sounds good. It's a sort of rebellious, heroic spirit. Part of this regulation presumably is restrictions on the way that these companies can advertise and market their products. So is some of this transformation narrative, you know, the chance to have these kinds of forums where they talk to celebrities and stuff. Is some of this a reaction to some of that restricted ability to market themselves in more traditional ways?

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Iona

Absolutely. We see with the implementation of tobacco control policies globally and the entering into force of the FCTC, we see increasingly the tobacco industry are coming up against policies that disallow certain forms of marketing or advertising and they respond to that very acutely. They adapt and they do innovate, so I'm not claiming that they're not an innovative business,

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Iona

they are certainly very good at adapting tactics to restrictive policy. The FCTC, for instance, says that public health policy settings should be free from the involvement of vested interests of the tobacco industry so instead of knocking on the door and trying to turn up to meetings, the industry have developed new ways of entering arenas. So they establish front groups or they lobby indirectly through individuals.

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Iona

And the other side of that would be, so to return to your original question about advertising and promotion, so bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship are not always comprehensive, which means that certain avenues may be left open or legal frameworks may be open to interpretation, and the tobacco industry have very good lawyers. And in terms of finding new ways to advertise,

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Iona

so events like Cannes Lion is a good surrogate for advertising because it's not covered by the legislation because it's not a marketing event. It's a media event. So discussions like that and inviting public personalities, well-known people to talk about their products and to demonstrate their engagement with companies like Philip Morris helps to lift the image of the company in the minds of consumers, saying, look, they're having open conversations and I know that person and I can trust that person, and it really helps the tobacco companies to bridge gaps or splits that have been caused in public minds.

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Louis

So we talk often about this phrase of denormalisation in tobacco control. So surely this is renormalisation in some senses?

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Iona

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, internal industry documents showed that normalisation was recognised and prioritised as a strategic goal for the companies, extending into, I think, this year was the end date that they listed in that document. But they need tobacco products and tobacco organisations to be accepted, in order for those products to continue to be consumed

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Iona

and public personalities are a good way of doing that. Another way they do that is by using influencers on social media, which is not allowed. But product advertising on social media does happen. Complaints about those advertisements have been upheld or partially upheld by the Advertising Standards Institute.

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Louis

And we all know that, you know, the advertising arena on social media is a bit of a Wild West anyway so it makes sense that that's a useful grey area for them to exploit.

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Iona

Yeah, absolutely. I think monitoring it is also extremely difficult. So from a countering industry action perspective, it's also very difficult to keep track of.

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Louis

This must be quite a unique challenge for tobacco companies as opposed to other corporate entities then, because there's so much pressure, you know, regulatory pressure on them, by the sounds of it they have become very skilled and nuanced at kind of circumventing these regulations.

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Iona

Yes. They are certainly very adept at responding to regulatory change. One of the ways that we can see their adaptability is in this boom of newer products. So we've seen, you mentioned earlier electronic cigarettes, Heated Tobacco Products and other nicotine tobacco products. The market is expanding hugely and that suits their narrative of transformation very well because it becomes very nebulous that, the market is extremely nebulous,

00:13:39:01 - 00:14:17:19

Iona

there are thousands, hundreds of thousands of products available, and they're not all owned by the tobacco industry, but it provides an avenue for the tobacco industry to start talking about their role as an established company in the market of these consumable products. So tobacco industry face to

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face with an electronic cigarette manufacturer, for instance, that's emerged to the market in the last five years, the tobacco industry are beginning to tell the story of themselves as a trusted manufacturer.

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Iona

Well, you know, we've been around for a long time, and we know what we're doing. We have the resources and the capacity to deliver, according to them, safer alternatives to combustible products. So for me, that's a really interesting thing to watch their response to market expansion of these newer products and to see the way that they mingle those discussions of newer products with discussions of harm and risk, which they often use to critique existing tobacco control measures.

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Iona

They say things like “you can't just say don't”. And so they begin to critique in these quite subtle ways, the way that we even think about tobacco control policy. I find that device, that informal device really interesting because it's so small you'd hardly notice it at all to say “you can't just say that” and it's a phrase we all come across

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Iona

but what they're really doing is saying the way that you think about what's true and what's not true, and what's permissible and what's not permissible is wrong.

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Louis

It's quite a philosophical discussion, really, which becomes quite ambiguous, I suppose. It's hard to have real world, to implement real world change when you're kind of bogged down in the philosophy of these conversations.

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Iona

Yeah and they're reconstructing what's reasonable. And if they can do that in the minds of the public, that makes them quite a dangerous player in public health policy.

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Louis

You mentioned that phrase that the industry uses “you can't just say, don't do that”. What are they specifically referring to there?

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Iona

Well, it works in in two key ways. I think they're saying you can't just say don't talk to the industry. So they talk a lot about their victimisation as an industry, their exclusion from policymaking and they frame it in this way. “You can't just say don't. We want to be part of it and we can be and we have the capacity and the resources to participate usefully in those discussions.”

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Iona

And on the other side, they're also advocating for consumer freedoms. So they're saying “You can't just tell people don't smoke. You have to give people choice.” But what they never mention is that tobacco is hugely addictive, and that individual choice and individual freedom don't come into discussions of addiction.

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Louis

That is quite a sort of victimised phrasing, really, isn't it? They sort of play themselves as the victim and or say their own consumers as well.

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Iona

Yeah, it's an interesting device. I was quite surprised in my research to encounter such a narrative of victimhood for such a big corporation who are keen to stress their structural dominance in these environments. They are extremely well funded. And they mention it a lot in all of their outward facing documents.

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Louis

So presumably in their inward facing documents, these kinds of reports you mentioned earlier, they don't protect themselves as quite such a victim.

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Iona

Absolutely. Yeah. So you see there are the two faces of the industry there and we don't have much evidence about, well let's say there's still questions remaining about how impactful this victimhood is for the industry. But I think based on the platforms we see it on, so we saw it in the Cannes Lion transcripts, and we also see it in their YouTube videos

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Iona

more than any other materials, they're trying to capture the hearts of a public, because who doesn't love an underdog? And it's just interesting to see them try and cast themselves that way.

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Louis

I mean, does that work then, are there sectors of the public who are seeing these multi-billion corporations as sort of victims in this ideological battle?

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Iona

I think so. I think it's also quite hard to say for certain one way or the other because the industry uses a lot of front groups and they engage with a lot of apparently grassroots organisations that are actually astroturf organisations so they represent industry interests.

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Louis

Just quickly define that term astroturf.

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Iona

Oh so that's a fake grassroots organisation. So something that has been engineered to appear like grass.

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Louis

To appear like it's come from the sort of the minds of the public but actually there's a corporate influence happening behind the scenes. We touched on this idea of victimhood and the phrases they use. Could you give us a couple of examples from your research that you've come across?

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Iona

Yeah. So there's the one I gave earlier about, "you can't just say don't". So in that way, they're saying, they highlight their isolation. And the other thing they often talk about is, "oh, there's these other people". So this is part of their construction of self, you know, it's important that they construct themselves as something different to tobacco control.

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Iona

So they talk about, "oh, well, some people, whatever we say, whatever we do, they will always try and say that it's about cigarettes" and they're talking about us, they are talking about tobacco control researchers, tobacco control advocates, people who monitor their activities. But it helps to polarise the arena of public health by saying, "we're a corporation and we're faced by people who don't even want to listen to us".

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Iona

But it's not that people aren't listening. There's a mandate under FCTC article 5.3, to not permit the tobacco industry to engage in public health policy setting. So by framing it as kind of a playground spat, they diminish, I think they diminish themselves, but, you know, they want the public to understand it as a petty quarrel, not a public health obligation.

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Louis

Yeah and a sort of legally binding position as well.

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Iona

Yeah, absolutely.

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Louis

This must be a complex area to work in as a researcher, especially when you have, you know, this influence, as you say, on the hearts and minds of the public, are there particular challenges you found working in this field trying to make sense of all these narratives and subtleties?

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Iona

Yeah, it's an interesting area to work in. I love the work that I do. I'm interested in storytelling of all kinds, and it's certainly a rich area to research for the reasons we've sort of talked about. You never know what story you will encounter next. In terms of challenges, I think it is quite hard to reconcile the different stories and also to disentangle meaning from a lot of it, because the transformation narratives are a great example of this, because what's transformation actually mean?

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Iona

You know, by itself it doesn't mean anything. And because they can load it with whatever they want, it means that it's not fixed. So they evolve over time. And it's the kind of thing that if we weren't constantly paying attention to these stories, I think we would quickly lose track of the sense of the argument because they're always in flux.

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Louis

It must feel like a bit of an arms race at times, like you've got this constantly shifting target and as kind of new regulation or approaches from academia try to tackle this issue, that the industry just kind of shifts again into a new gear. I mean, are there any ways to really pin down this issue of this kind of shifting narrative, even through kind of regulatory approaches or kind of research approaches?

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Iona

I think the appropriate response is a little bit of everything. So we see that with efforts in multiple places, so with appropriate monitoring, with regulation that's responsive, I mean that's a difficult one to, that's sort of like the dream list isn't it, responsive regulation because things don't happen quickly in government, but they can happen very quickly in corporate environments.

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Iona

So sometimes there is this feeling that we're a step behind. But what we do see is a lot of the same tactics repeated again and again. So even though the industry are incredibly responsive to change, the ways in which they respond tend to follow a certain pattern, which is well-established in the evidence, which means that we as a community of researchers and tobacco control advocates and policymakers already have the tools ready to respond to their changes.

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Iona

So, for me, it's really about continuing to do what we're doing and to make the most of our learnings thus far.

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Louis

So that kind of gives you a head start, really, when these narratives start to shift, inevitably.

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Iona

Yes, yes, you're right. It is inevitable, that they will change and we'll see what patterns redouble.

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Louis

How do you go about kind of gathering this information or who comes to you with this information?

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Iona

Well, what sort of triggered this line of work is we often get contacted or we work together with tobacco control advocates, tobacco control policy makers who are doing work on the ground in the policy setting arena, coming to us and saying that we know these things are happening and we know that they're telling these stories and we're afraid of the impact it's going to have on uptake or on normalisation, but we don't have any evidence to make the argument to the powerful players, essentially.

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Iona

So we listen and I come from a background in linguistics and data so we put our heads together and develop this method where we make use of all the publicly available information from tobacco companies. So getting data from their websites using their reports, their annual reports, their sustainability reports, looking at their different social media channels.

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Iona

And we put that data together in a way that allows us to highlight patterns and trends in the language. So we use computational linguistics software to run queries to show us words that are uncommonly common in the language of the tobacco industry, for instance, when compared with general English and to help us isolate areas where we can see normalisation happening in real time.

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Louis

So you're essentially providing this sort of evidential resource for others to then go and take on these companies.

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Iona

That's the idea.

00:25:55:11 - 00:26:07:12

Louis

Presumably this must be playing out at the moment in the UK context with the Tobacco and Vapes Bill that is going through Parliament. Are you able to give us a little description of how the industry is dealing with that potential threat?

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Iona

Yes. So we know that the big tobacco organisations have lobbied that Bill extensively in expected ways, let's say. So when the Bill was first tabled, all four of the big transnational corporations warned the government that there would be a legal challenge to the Bill. But we've also seen a countering in terms of trying to get amendments made to the Bill.

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Iona

So having Heated Tobacco Products removed from the Bill. They lobbied the UK government about the Tobacco and Vapes Bill, arguing that the Bill would impinge on individual freedoms, and all four big transnationals warned that there would be legal challenges to the bill.

00:26:51:20 - 00:26:57:14

Louis

What does that mean that legal challenge? So they can essentially take the government to court over that piece of legislation?

00:26:57:18 - 00:27:31:17

Iona

Yes, which they have done in the past, and they do in response to a lot of legislation globally, to challenge regulation on the basis that it threatens business competition or undermines branding freedoms. But it can be anything. So we've seen in some challenges to implementation, we've seen the tobacco industry challenge on legal basis the definition of sucking.

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Iona

So this was relating to a snus product and the implementation of regulation. So we see then...

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Louis

So these are nicotine pouch type products?

00:27:39:07 - 00:27:58:08

Iona

Yes. But they took that matter to court and they used language and their interpretation of a particular term in order to claim that the regulation did not cover one of their products and should therefore be exempt.

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Louis

So that's a pretty legally aggressive position for an industry that's supposedly a public health ally.

00:28:05:00 - 00:28:06:22

Iona

Yes, absolutely.

00:28:06:24 - 00:28:16:23

Louis

And just finally, for the average listener for whom this whole concept might be quite new, what's the one thing about this so-called transformation that you'd like people to come away remembering?

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Iona

So probably that transformation is about process. It doesn't mean anything unless you can see what's underneath the patter. So don't automatically read transformation as something positive. There be dragons.

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Louis

And thank you very much for joining me today.

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Iona

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

00:28:37:11 - 00:28:53:07

Louis

The sources for today's discussion can be found in the episode shownotes. We'll be back next week, where we'll be joined by Leslie Rae Ferat and Allen Gallagher to talk in more detail about how international treaties combat the global tobacco industry. See you next time.

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Louis

From the Tobacco Control Research Group, you've been listening to season two of Deadly Industry: Challenging Big Tobacco, hosted by Louis Laurence, produced by Kate White and edited by Sacha Goodwin. The production manager is Jacqueline Oliver. You can email us at tobacco-admin@bath.ac.uk or find us on LinkedIn, Bluesky and X. This is a University of Bath production.